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2 AGENCIES REPORT SOVIET ARMS SPURT

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 25 — Analysts for the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon said today that there was evidence of a sudden spurt in Soviet spending on weapons procurement for the first time since the mid-1970's. But the agencies differed sharply on the pace of this latest buildup and what it meant.

The Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency estimated that the weapons part of the Soviet military budget had increased by 5 to 8 percent from 1982 to 1983, the last year studied, and said preliminary signs pointed to another increase in 1984.

The C.I.A., basing its estimate on what one official called "a little more cautious" forecast of how fast the new weapons would roll off the assembly lines, said that Soviet weapons spending rose between 1 and 2 percent in 1983 and that it was too early to tell about 1984.

Evidence Called Tentative

A C.I.A. analyst added that his agency considered the evidence for the 1983 spurt to be tentative. "We're less certain that the change occurred in 1983," he said.

Economic analysts from the two intelligence agencies spoke to reporters today in the office of the Defense Department spokesman, Michael I. Burch, in an attempt to dispel reports that they disagreed on the Soviet buildup.

The differing estimates of Soviet spending have become part of a running debate over American military spending, with critics of the Pentagon citing the C.I.A. numbers as evidence that the Defense Department has exaggerated the Soviet competition.

"I think the Administration has definitely oversold the Soviet military threat," Senator William Proxmire said today. Mr. Proxmire, a Wisconsin Democrat, is the ranking Democrat on a Congressional economic subcommittee that last week made public the transcript of C.I.A. testimony last November on the Soviet economy.

Years of 'Stagnation' Noted

In that testimony, the Deputy Director for Intelligence, Robert Gates, cited "preliminary" evidence of an acceleration in Soviet weapons buying in 1983 after six years of "stagnation."

He said that overall Soviet military spending had grown at the rate of about 2 percent since 1976, after adjusting for inflation. That is the same estimate the C.I.A. has used since 1983.

Mr. Proxmire and others said the stagnation reported in Soviet arms spending before 1983 contradicted the claim of a huge Russian buildup by the Administration, which has pushed for a rapid growth in American military spending. United States military spending has grown nearly 9 percent a year since 1980 and weapons procurement has grown at about 13 percent a year.

Mr. Gates did not take part in the briefing today, but the Pentagon distributed a statement by him saying that his earlier testimony had been "misread and misused."

Buildup Called Unprecedented

"The awesome fact," the statement said, "is that despite a temporary leveling off in the rate of growth in Soviet military procurement, the Soviets consistently not only outspent the U.S. throughout, but produced far more missiles, planes, warships, tanks and other weapons than the U.S." from 1976 to 1983.

Mr. Burch said the C.I.A. estimates were not inconsistent with the public statements of Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger that the Russians are engaged in an "unprecedented" buildup. Mr. Burch said the Defense Secretary agreed that the growth of Soviet spending had slowed since the mid-1970's, but preferred to emphasize the number of weapons the Russians turn out for the money.

The C.I.A. and Pentagon analysts generally agreed today that growth in Soviet budgets, after surging in the 1960's and early 1970's, tapered off in 1976 as the Soviet economy sagged.

A Defense Intelligence Agency analyst said today that "we really don't take issue with" C.I.A. estimates that the growth in rubles, adjusted for inflation, fell to about 2 percent from 4 or 5 percent. The defense agency uses a figure of about 5 percent for those years, but that estimate is not adjusted to account for inflation.

Both agencies estimate that the Russians spend 13 to 17 percent of their gross national product on the military while the United States spends about 7 percent of its national output. The G.N.P. of the United States, however, is about twice that of the Soviet Union.

One of the Pentagon analysts also said Mr. Gates was "probably right" when he said the Soviet economy could not stand a return to the military buildup rates of the years before 1976.

The C.I.A. and the Pentagon measure Soviet weapons spending by using satellite photographs, observation of weapons tests and deliveries and other information to calculate what the Russian factories are producing. Then the agencies estimate what it would cost American manufacturers to make the same weapon.

The analysts said this method is risky for comparing Soviet and American costs, but is more reliable for measuring how fast Soviet production is growing.

The analysts said that when it came to weapons systems, the two agencies used similar intelligence reports, but sometimes ended up with different projections of how many weapons the Russians would produce and how fast.

"Ours is a little more cautious," said a C.I.A. analyst.